

THE MANAGER**PROFIT MANAGEMENT***By Cathy Wickswat*

The Trundy family takes steps to secure the future of its Maine dairy farm

Plan your future; work your plan

One thing is certain about dairy farming -- there's constant change, with the pace of change in the last decade seeming faster than ever. Dairy farms get larger, cows produce more milk, the number of dairies declines, and locations with dairy farms change. This makes planning for the future all the harder for dairy farm families. But plan they must.

The Trundy family of Minot, Maine, has seen plenty of change and made many decisions since starting Twin Brook Farm in 1979. At that time, Maynard "Sonny" and Suzy Trundy bought a former slaughter facility, converted it to a stanchion barn and started a herd. Prior to that Sonny had worked with his father and uncle.

The couple raised their three children – Sarah, Adam and Aaron – on the dairy. Adam, the younger son, worked with his parents on the dairy throughout high school and two years of technical carpentry school. Aaron worked as a machinist and operated his own carpentry business.

When Sonny became ill, the family had to make

decisions. They wanted to keep the dairy in the family, and Aaron decided to come back to work with his brother.

When they lost Sonny, the Trundys knew they faced more changes if they wanted to continue the dairy as a viable business that could support Suzy, her sons and their families.

Fortunately, the brothers have the necessary skills – Adam is the cow man and Aaron manages crops. They can build and fix many facilities and equipment. Suzy is the financial manager and believes family members must work together as a team to get the best results financially and personally.

"The changes would have to make everything in the business more efficient," Adam said at the time. "We wanted to be profitable and not spend all day every day doing chores."

"If this couldn't be accomplished, we should not make the changes, and we should look at opportunities other than the dairy industry," Aaron said.

Decision time

In 2009-2010 the family spent time making decisions about the dairy's future. At that point the Trundys were milking 60 to 70 cows in a facility built in the early part of the 19th century. In 2006 they had added onto the back of the original barn, putting in freestalls, a center feed alley and a bedded pack. The brothers converted the original barn to a tie-up pipeline milking setup.

Even with the upgrades, Adam and Aaron agreed their housing was inefficient. They spent most of their time every day feeding, cleaning and milking



After careful planning, Suzy Trundy and her sons, Adam, at left, and Aaron, made tough decisions to continue their Minot, Maine, dairy farm. Among changes was a new freestall barn to improve cow comfort.

FYI

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cows. Cows were visibly uncomfortable, and the family was exhausted.

The Trundys knew they had to make changes to have time for their families and to make enough profit to support them. They built a bunk silo to streamline forage storage and feeding.

Also, in 2008 they built a freestall barn to house heifers and manage their care at home. Prior to this heifers were housed in other barns or on pastures, a costly, time-consuming setup. The heifer freestall barn worked well, and the brothers knew their cows needed the same level of comfort.

Comfortable cows fed high quality forages generate more profit, the Trundys knew. But they also knew that putting together the best facility for the future takes time and planning. The process took these things into consideration:

1. Assess financial situation. This was the family's first step. They used their financial skills to develop a plan their lender would support.

2. Evaluate resources. Adam and Aaron knew their future profit depended on the right combination of land, crops, cows, facilities, labor, machinery and management as they expanded.

The brothers agree that a big key to success is an adequate amount of high quality feed. "One of the key areas for profit is we have enough land to grow the needed forages and to keep a buffer of stored forages in the range of 15% to 20%," Aaron said.

3. Learn about other facilities. The family traveled to look at facilities in other areas, gathering ideas for their current project and also for the future. They checked out robotic milkers, though there are no dealers in the Trundys' area. But robotic milkers could be part of their future, Aaron says. He has the mechanical skills to manage them and perhaps to be a dealer.

4. Family time. The brothers wanted more time with their young families instead of "being in the barn from morning until night," Suzy said.

The family decided to build a 100-foot four-row freestall barn for the milking herd and to install a used double-six herringbone parlor in the old milking barn.

Freestalls are 48 inches wide and 8 feet long. The dairy beds with sand, which the Trundys have in large supply on the farm. Manure is pushed into a storage pit.

The family budgeted \$300,000 for the project, and their lender approved a loan in late summer of 2010. The project came in very



close to budget for the milking parlor and freestall barn.

Positive outcome

High quality sand and improved freestalls create a comfortable cow environment. It's common to see almost every cow lying in a stall. They're extremely clean, and the somatic cell count has decreased from an acceptable 250,000 to less than 120,000 consistently.

With more resting time, production has consistently climbed. The brothers believe with their new facilities and management changes production can reach 90 pounds or more.

The brothers' biggest challenge is herd reproduction. Over the transition they made it a priority for the team to get a consistent pregnancy rate of 25%. Since they've moved into the new barn, they've had some months at that level but want to achieve it consistently.

So far, so good for the Trundys. They believe they made the right decision to continue in the dairy business. They knew the changes made to an already profitable business would keep them profitable and competitive.

Now the Trundys want to use their profits to make further changes and increase the size of their business. Currently, the dairy has 104 cows in the milking herd. What size for the future? Like other dairy families, it will depend on many factors: agreement of all the family members involved and available land resources.

What advice do Adam and Aaron have for other young families?

- Long-range planning is essential; know where you want to go in the future.
- Develop a plan and keep reviewing it.
- Opportunities can appear at any time; plan ahead so you are ready to take advantage of these. □